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Please cite this publication as follows:

Kent, A. J. (2019) The wondermaps of Max Gill. *The Ephemerist*, 184 (Spring). pp. 12-19.

Link to official URL (if available):

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The Wondermaps of Max Gill

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Leslie MacDonald 'Max' Gill
(1884–1947) — architect, illustrator,
letterer, decorative artist —
and revolutionary map-maker.

MacDonald 'Max' Gill, c1920
Private collection

Maps need our imagination to work. Few maps, however, stimulate our imagination with as much delight and wonder as those of Leslie MacDonald (Max) Gill (1884–1947) — architect, illustrator, letterer, decorative artist — and revolutionary map-maker.

Born in Brighton as the third of eleven children of a non-conformist minister and a professional singer, Max was painting and drawing buildings and maps from an early age. He trained with a local architect when his family moved to Bognor in 1899 and joined the London firm Nicholson and Corlette in 1903. Through attending evening classes at the Central School of Arts & Crafts under the tutelage of Edward Johnston (designer of the iconic Johnston typeface and the London Underground logo), he developed an interest in Roman lettering and began to undertake commissions for work on signs and memorials, often in collaboration with his older brother Eric (creator of the Gill Sans typeface). By 1908, Max had gained enough standing to establish his own practice as an architect and lettering artist and in the following year, renowned architect Edwin Lutyens commissioned Max to create a wind-indicator map for Nashdom, a new Buckinghamshire mansion that Lutyens had designed. A key feature of the map was its beautiful Roman lettering, which Max incorporated on his painted maps for other prestigious buildings, such as Lindisfarne Castle, and was to become a hallmark of his cartography.

It was his pictorial poster maps, however, that were to propel Max's career into the limelight and earn him worldwide renown as a cartographer. In 1913, he was introduced to Frank Pick, the Commercial Manager of the Underground Electric Railways of London. Pick was launching a campaign to promote the Underground as an easy way to access the city's attractions and to boost morale for users of the ailing transport system. Max was commissioned to produce a bright pictorial poster map that would appease, inform and amuse passengers waiting on the dark platforms. The result, which he completed in 1914, was *The Wonderground Map of London Town* (🗺️). It is a spectacular design, bursting with life through its bold

primary colours, detailed illustrations of people and places, and humorous quips and quotes from nursery rhymes and poems. Some examples include a figure being hanged from Tyburn Tree exclaiming 'Underground I'll go when my neck gives out. Ozone to breathe, that vulture to flour' and a man at the bottom of the map asking 'What scale is this map?' to which another retorts 'Can't you read?', pointing to the nearby statement of six inches to the mile. Elsewhere, a whiff of social commentary is offered by a ploughman crying 'Harrowing work this!' to which a top-hatted passer-by replies 'What is WORK, is it a HERB?'.

The Wonderground Map was displayed in every London Underground station and was almost too successful. In May 1914, the *Daily Sketch* reported that 'People spend so long looking at this map — they miss their trains yet go on smiling' and a folded version was soon put on sale. The map epitomised Max's approach to cartography; a revolutionary method that drew upon medieval visual tradition by reintroducing its cartographic language of rich graphical detail to depict people and places. Indeed, his vibrant and captivating portrayal of London had more in common with the fantastical thirteenth-century Hereford Mappa Mundi than with the sterile aesthetic of scientific reductionism that had characterised cartography's trajectory since the Enlightenment. Max's cartographic vision heralded a new approach that drew on the best antique tradition by appealing to the imagination, connecting users of the Underground with its living, breathing city.

Following the outbreak of war that same year, Max contributed to the war effort in two important ways. Firstly, he worked as an architect on the Bladen Estate in Dorset, an experimental project to create a self-sufficient village that combined traditional and locally sourced building materials with modern conveniences, such as bathrooms. Secondly, Max was invited to design the lettering used by the Imperial War Graves Commission for the standard military headstone, as well as that for the Whitehall Cenotaph (which was designed by Lutyens). In contrast to the bustling metropolis of his *Wonderground Map*, Max deftly applied his great craftsmanship here to

convey everlasting peace and dignity for the fallen. The tone lies in stark contrast to *London Theatreland* (1915) (reproduced on page 19), which was a follow-up commission to *Wonderground* by the Underground Electric Railways and published by the Westminster Press. The map adopts a similar perspective to its predecessor and ingeniously portrays the West End's streets, Underground stations and parks on a huge theatre curtain that is centred on St Martin's Lane. The range of Max's outputs during the First World War testifies to the integrity, versatility and sensitivity of his artistic vision, which is often overlooked.

After the war, Max was established as the leading decorative map-maker of the day and he continued to attract commissions to design pictorial maps throughout the 1920s. Amongst the most famous — and spectacular — was *Highways of Empire* (1927), a huge 20ft by 10 ft poster that was mounted in 16 sections. Such was its impact when it was unveiled on Charing Cross Road in London that it stopped traffic, and policemen even had to move crowds along the pavement. Commissioned by the Empire Marketing Board to boost consumer loyalty, the map became an iconic representation of the British Empire at its height, with all its possessions coloured scarlet. Max's truly remarkable design replaced the familiar Mercator world projection and its enlargement of the northern hemisphere, with a huge semi-circular projection that put London firmly at the centre of a shrinking world.

During the 1930s, Max continued to receive commissions from private individuals, organisations and institutions. Work included murals for the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge and for the Houses of Parliament. The persistent optimism and flamboyance of Max's pictorial maps continues to be seen in his *Map of Ceylon showing her Tea & other industries* (1933) (1), which he designed for the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board. The elephants, crocodiles, leopards, flamingos and other exotic wildlife peer through the vibrant greens of tea plantations and palm forests, while the undulating blue and white stripes of the Indian Ocean carry rigged and steel warships merrily around the island.



1
Map of Ceylon showing her Tea & other industries, 1933

Publisher:
Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, London

h 99cm w 62 cm

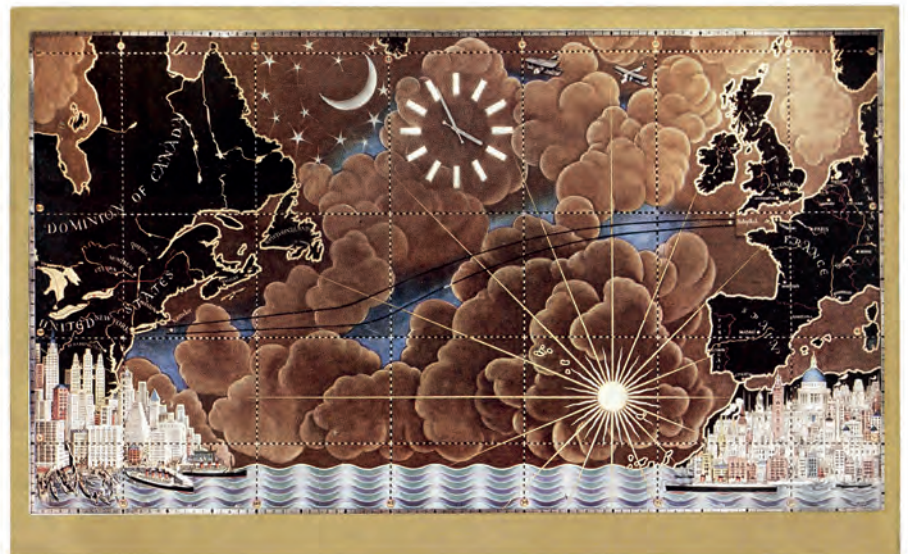
MIDDLE
PAGE SPREAD

The Wonderground Map of London Town, 1914

Published by
Westminster Press, London

h 76cm x w 95cm

Private collection
Image © TFL from London Transport Museum



3
Luncheon menu, showing a reproduction of the map-mural on the R.M.S. Queen Mary, 1937

Publisher:
Cunard White Star Line

h 28 cm x w 22 c



2
Max Gill painting R.M.S. Queen Mary map-mural, 1935

THE HEART OF BRITAIN'S EMPIRE

TO PIN ON YOUR WALL!

TAKE A MAP HOME

TO ADMIRE IT ALL? WHY NOT!



St. MARYLEBONE

KENSINGTON

CHELSEA

St. MARYLEBONE

St. MARYLEBONE

HERE IS SPREAD OUT FOR YOUR VIEW.



IT SHOWS YOU MANY STATIONS

& BUS ROUTES NOT A FEW

YOU HAVE NOT THE TIME.

WONDERGROUND MAP OF THE LONDON TOWN OF LONDON. Drawn by MacKenzie & Co. and published by The Westminster Press Co. Ltd. 11 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London W.C.2.



LAMBETH

The bold message of the map is one of abundance and prosperity and the copious illustrations again echo the captivating pictorial details of medieval *mappae mundi*.

Perhaps Max's most impressive cartographic design of the 1930s was his transatlantic map-mural for the first-class dining room of the passenger liner *RMS Queen Mary*, which made its maiden voyage in 1936 (2 and 3). Tracing the liner's route across the Atlantic, the painted map includes exquisite compositions of key buildings in New York and London in the left and right corners respectively, displaying Max's attention to architectural detail and form that he had learnt from his trade as an architect. Cartography and architecture share a common blending of art, science and technology, and the processes of mapping and building rely on a sound understanding of aesthetics and design to succeed. They also involve the construction of new worlds, and the worlds Max built in his maps of the 1930s shone through this period of economic gloom.

Work during the Second World War included the plucky *Tea Revives the World*, commissioned by the International Tea Market Expansion Board to encourage the consumption of tea — that most English of foreign commodities — and various propaganda posters for the Ministry of Information. One of Max's most outstanding and spectacular designs of the decade was *The 'Time & Tide' Map of the Atlantic Charter* (1942) (4), commissioned by *Time & Tide* magazine to celebrate the agreement signed in 1941 between President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill on post-war Allied goals (which would lay the foundations for the United Nations in 1945). Max's design shows a free world bathed in glorious sunshine radiating from the top of the map, underneath a scroll in Roman script that is reminiscent of the *Magna Carta*. Curiously, a German counter-map was produced in the same year that aimed to undermine the Charter and to ridicule Max's map. Resembling a ghostly black and white sketch, the contrast between their designs — and their visions for post-war civilisation — could not be greater.

After the war, Max created his final poster-map, *The Great Circle Map* (1945), for Cable & Wireless (5). Around two metres wide by one metre tall, the map

uses an azimuthal projection where straight-line distances are correct from the central point of London. Radio and undersea cable telecommunications connect the British Empire — which again is shown in scarlet — from core to periphery. The map incorporates roundels in its corners, each of which illustrates an associated technological achievement such as the SS *Great Eastern* laying the first durable transatlantic telegraph cable in 1866. Max's signature combination of bold colours with elaborate lettering (which, in his labelling of the oceans, emulates the 'swash' style of copper-engraved atlases of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), presents here a brave new world with unabashed post-war optimism and heralds the dawn of the Information Age. His last painted map was a panorama of the North Atlantic for the liner *RMS Queen Elizabeth* that was completed in August 1946. Shortly afterwards, Max was diagnosed with lung cancer and he died in Chelsea on 14th January 1947, aged 62.

Although Max's artistic endeavours have since tended to go unnoticed and his profile overshadowed by that of his older brother Eric, his influence and legacy — particularly regarding cartography — cannot be underestimated. Max's particular use of lettering and colour, which are the essential visual ingredients of any cartographic style, lend his maps a distinctive and recognisable aesthetic that was emulated around the world. As Burdon (2009) has noted, not only did Max's *Wonderground Map* spawn a clearly identifiable genre that was to appear in the United States, Canada, Latin America and Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, it marked a resurgence of decorative mapmaking that lasted throughout the century and beyond. The Roman style of lettering introduced by J.G. Withycombe in 1928 for a new series of one-inch Ordnance Survey maps drew inspiration from the handwritten styles of the early sixteenth century through to the early eighteenth centuries that were favoured by Max, and it is not unlikely that Max's pictorial maps had some influence on the style of the new OS 'Popular Edition' map. Ironically, while decorative lettering has since fallen out of favour with cartographers, the Gill Sans typeface designed

by Eric remains a preferred choice for labelling settlements on maps, having exceptional clarity and legibility at smaller font sizes.

All maps are selective and idealized portrayals. They show us what the world should be and invoke our imagination in order to share that vision. The most memorable maps are those which inform, entertain, and draw us in for a closer look. The special thing about each of Max's maps is that they go beyond the normal expectations of cartographic design. They inspire wonder and allow us to discover something new about their subject every time we encounter them. Unlike the vast majority of those made in Max's day, his maps included people: they portrayed life and vitality; they connected us with their subject; and they re-introduced a sense of humanity to mapping. Their hand-drawn aesthetic is a key ingredient of their style. This is what was missing — and in many ways, still is — from mainstream cartography (although in recent years there has been a resurgence of artistic approaches to mapping, e.g., in the hand-drawn maps of London by artist Stephen Walter). Today, when we are saturated by imagery, digital globes and satnavs, it is heartening that there is renewed interest in the cartographer's eye and how it sees the world. Max's vision was positive, optimistic and engaging, and has a lot to offer cartographers and map-users alike. A greater examination and appreciation of his rich cartographic legacy is therefore both timely and long overdue. 🗺️

Further reading

Burdon E., *MacDonald Gill: The Wonderground Map of 1913 and its influence*, *Journal of the International Map Collectors' Society* 116, pp.7-18, 2009.

Walker, C.M. *MacDonald Gill*, Available at www.macdonaldgill.com

Walker, C.M. and Johnston, A. (n.d.) *The Life and Legacy of MacDonald Gill*

Available at www.bl.uk/maps/articles/the-life-and-legacy-

4

'Time & Tide' Map of the Atlantic Charter, 1942

Printer: George Philip & Son, Ltd, The London Geographical Institute

н 82cm x w 111cm

The "TIME & TIDE" Map of THE ATLANTIC CHARTER

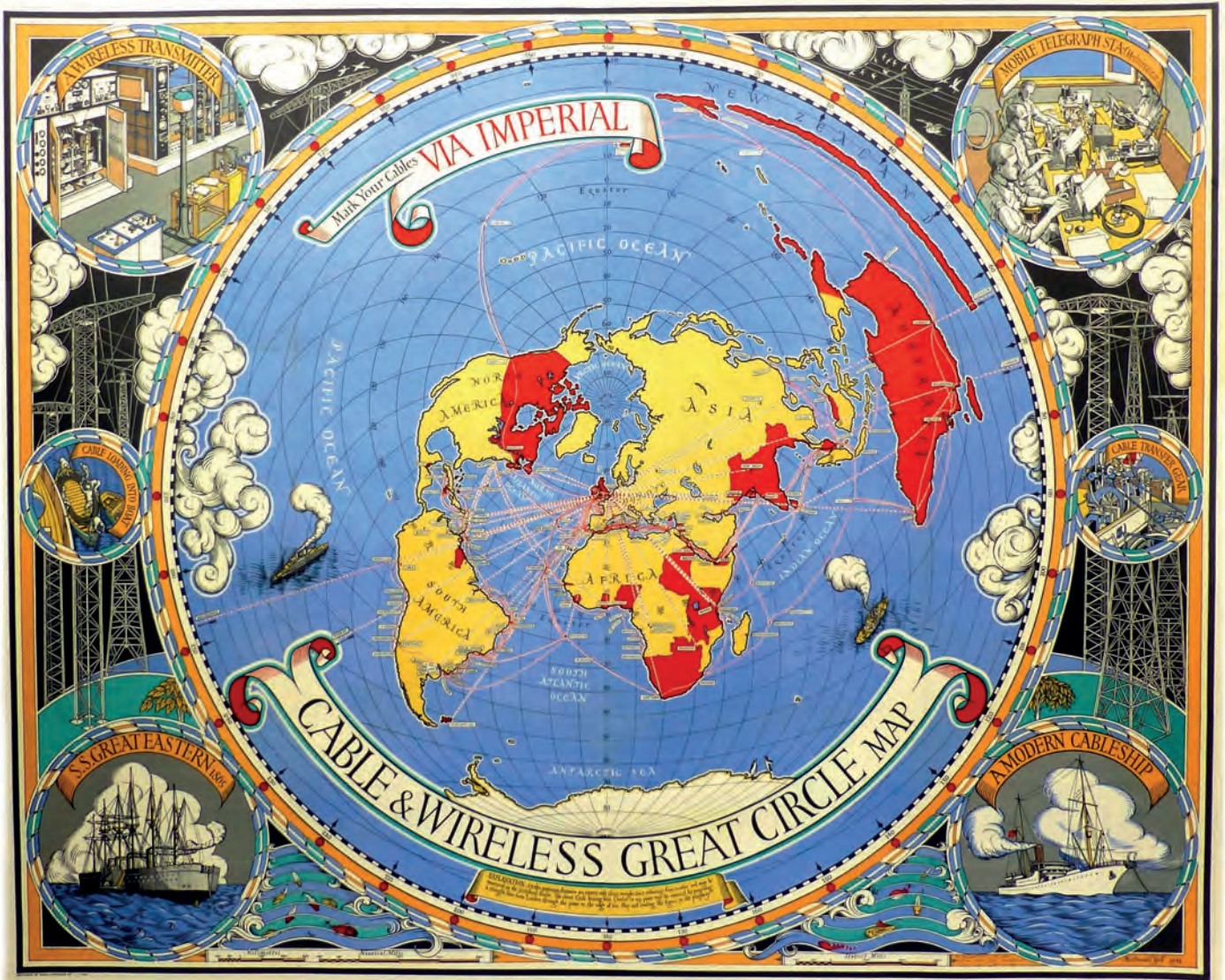


5

Cable & Wireless Great Circle Map, 1945

н 108cm x w 132cm

Private collection



The exhibition, *Max Gill: Wonderground Man*, is running at the Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft until 28 April 2019. Entrance is free.

Long after Gill's death, a major collection of his work was discovered in the Sussex cottage that had once been his home, revealing many pieces of artwork that had not been seen for over sixty years. Rolled up, carefully packed away and labeled by his wife Priscilla Johnston, the works were uncovered by her nephew Andrew (grandson of London Underground typeface designer Edward Johnston) when he inherited the cottage. He and his wife Angela were thrilled to discover Gill's posters including *Theatreland* (1915) and the charming *Peter Pan Map of Kensington Gardens* (1923), alongside the artwork for the *Cable & Wireless Great Circle Map* (1945), as well as his designs for book covers, illustrations and logos. Suddenly vivid colours were revealed, as vibrant as the day the works were created. When Andrew and Angela met Caroline Walker (great niece of Max) who was already researching his life and work, the three began working together to document the collection. They are guest curators of the exhibition.

The exhibition shows many of Gill's promotional transport maps, including an early version of the London Underground system map (1922) and the *The Country Bus-Services Map* (1928), as well as *Theatreland*, *Peter Pan Map* and *Wonderground*. It also shows how Gill both embraced the modern age and yet also drew heavily on the past: mythical sea monsters and full-rigged galleons seen on his book cover for *Sea Magic* by E. Hallam Moorhouse (1916) feature alongside the aircraft and wireless transmitter masts decorating his maps, heralding the dawn of the mobile phone and the internet. His architect's eye was drawn to buildings and technology rather than the human figure, and yet humanity is ever-present in his work, thanks to his humorous and charming way of seeing and recording the world around him.

Accompanying the exhibition will be a small display in the museum's Print Gallery, which will take a look at the impact that WWI had on artists in and around Ditchling.



LEFT
Dust jacket for
The Week-End Book
by Francis Meynell,
1926

Private Collection



ABOVE
Book map from
*The World in the
Time of Cabot* (1517)
by Martin Hardie,
1924

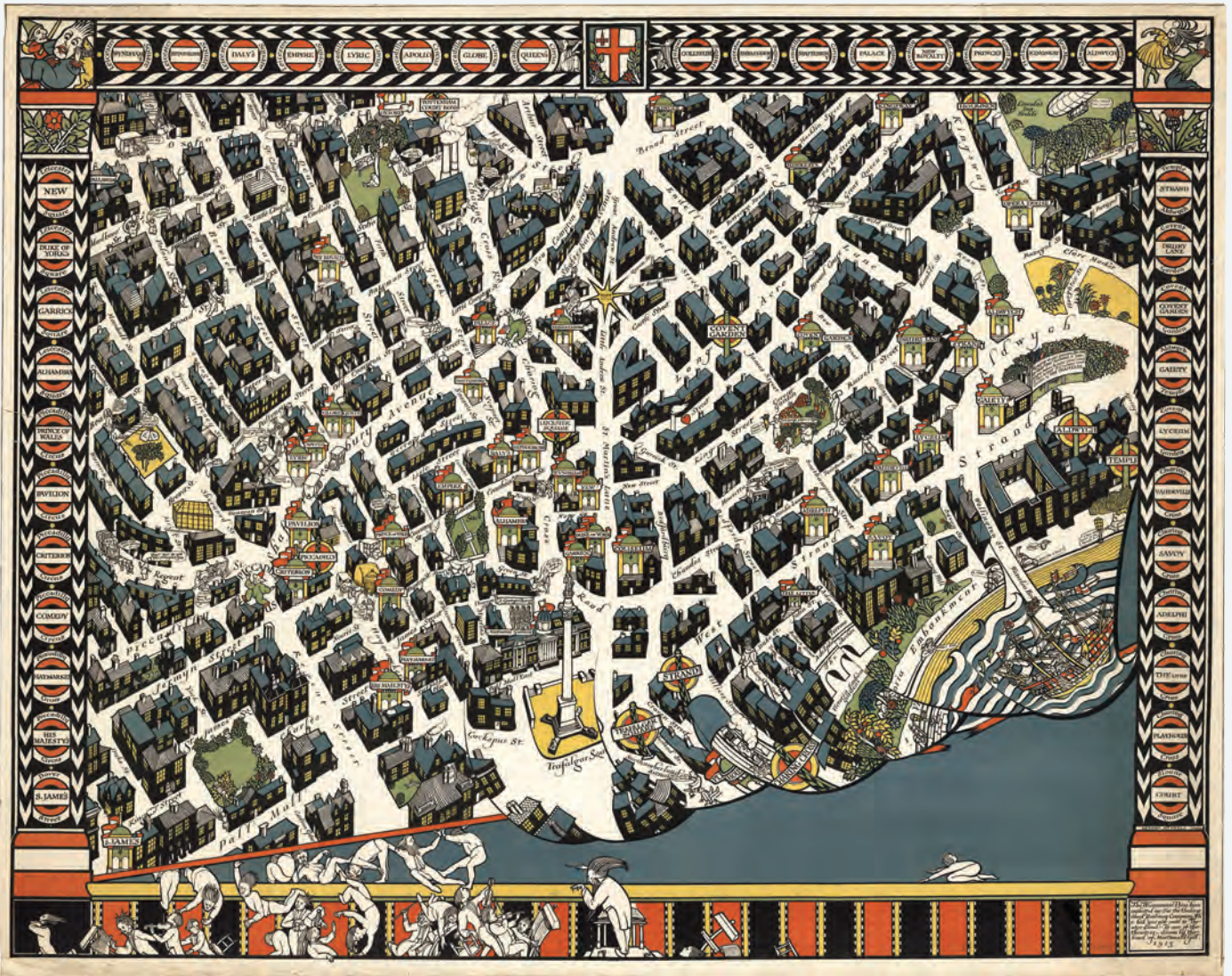
Publisher:
Fleetway Press Ltd

H 41cm x w 31cm



LEFT
Dust jacket for
Coricancha Garden of Gold
by AF Tschiffely, 1943

Private collection



ABOVE
London Theatreland, 1915
 Published by Waterlow
 & Sons, London.
 H 102cm x w 127cm

RIGHT
*The Country
 Bus-Services Map, 1928*
 A Bartholomew/London
 Transport Souvenir Map.
 H 102cm x w 127cm

